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The perversity of battleships

By Stansfield Turner

The old battleships rusting away at anchor in some forgotten mothballed fleet somewhere may just be what the Navy needs to shove it into the future.

Every 10 years or so, it seems, the Navy comes up with a scheme to solve its problems by reactivating World War II battleships. The USS New Jersey was brought back to life for service in Vietnam and now the secretary of the Navy is pushing to bring the New Jersey back again along with the Iowa and maybe the Wisconsin and Missouri. Battleships may be vulnerable to Soviet missiles as some critics claim, but they are unsinkable in the minds and hearts of the Navy brass. That may not be all that bad — but not entirely for the reasons being given.

The Navy's argument runs along these lines. Battleships are large and their sea-keeping qualities make them a remarkably stable platform for whatever you want to put on their decks. The four Iowa-class ships under consideration, although constructed in the 1940s, have been little used and so should have 15-20 years more life in their hulls. Putting each one into service will cost no more than a new destroyer, yet you'll have it sooner and

get more ship for the money. If you installed lots of cruise missiles on them, you could significantly increase the fire power of the fleet and spread that power beyond the 12 aircraft carriers around which the fleet is built today.

I agree. But why stop there, shipmates? If we would be better off with our naval power distributed to 16 ship platforms, and if it's cruise missiles that will make the difference, what's wrong with all the other ships, aircraft, and submarines in the US Navy today? Let's be sure that the Navy is moving full speed ahead on installing cruise missiles as widely as possible.

Beyond that, today's cruise missiles can be used only against fixed targets on land. The beauty of the cruise missile is that if you know in advance the geographical coordinates of the target, the missile can be programmed to fly to that precise point. But what if we need to strike at ships, tanks, trains, and troop concentrations that are likely to be on the move? If a cruise missile is going to be really valuable, it needs outside help to tell it where the moving target is going. It can get that from a reconnaissance aircraft from an aircraft carrier.

If, however, we are attempting to disperse the Navy's striking power more widely, the

battleship must be able to operate independently of the carriers. This means placing either vertical short take-off and landing aircraft (VSTOL) or remotely piloted drones (RPVs) on the battleship as its eyes and ears. In Dr. Edward Teller's words such vehicles might be more capable than a man in an aircraft anyway: "Indeed, when you consider the military needs of observation and the transmission of information, electronics can out-do the human's ability any time."

Such are the wonders of the modern technologies of data processing and data transmission. It is even possible with these technologies to guide a weapon directly to a moving target by remote control from the battleship. It may require the use of satellites or other RPVs to see and hear the target during the entire attack.

Unfortunately, the Navy has not seen fit over the years to invest more than token funds to perfect VSTOL aircraft or remotely piloted reconnaissance drones or the various techniques of over-the-horizon data transmission between ships and aircraft or drones. Last year, for instance, less than \$10 million was spent by the Navy on research into VSTOL aircraft.

If we now spend a lot of money to bring back some battleships, it would be irresponsible not to move ahead vigorously with the reconnaissance command and control capabilities which are an inseparable part of making cruise missiles effective. Without such capabilities the battleship would clearly be a white elephant for no one can justify its cost based on the 16-inch guns it carries.

This, then is the perversity of the argument to bring back the battleship. It is a good idea not because it's big or cheap or available. It's a good idea because it can, and hopefully will, encourage the Navy to move into a new era of technology with immense implications for the future shape of our ships. We should insist that the relatively small accompanying investment in cruise missile technologies be made and that the Navy install a cruise missile capability against fixed and moving targets on as many ships, aircraft and submarines as possible. We must not end up with only a few showcase battleships with little fighting potential. The Navy has an immense opportunity here to move into the world of modern technologies on a broad front.

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